



THE GREAT COMMISSION

**Ministry to the Poor**

Throughout the history of the church, the sharing of the gospel has been paired with a compassion for the poor, both within the church and outside of the church. The following article addresses many key issues related to this very important aspect of the Christian life--ministry to the poor.





## Ministry to the Poor

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*NOTE: Many of the thoughts from this paper were based on a summary written by Brent Knox of a discussion by the elders at Evergreen Church in Minneapolis. I appreciate their contribution.*

### Introduction

In the 4th century, the Roman Emperor Julian testified that the Christians were more charitable to non-Christians than non-Christians were to each other:

*Why do we not observe that it is their benevolence to strangers ... and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done the most to increase atheism [i.e., Christians not believing in the Romans gods]. ... It is disgraceful that when ... the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men should see how our people lack aid from us.*

Throughout the centuries, the gospel of Jesus Christ has advanced because of the powerful example of Christians like these who cared for the needy. This paper is written to address this very important matter of ministry to the poor.

In this paper, I have three overall objectives:

- I. That church members in Great Commission churches grow in compassion, reaching out to the poor and needy in new and dynamic ways.
- II. That church members in Great Commission have a solid biblical and eternal perspective on this matter of ministering to the poor.
- III. That Great Commission church pastors adopt a 5-fold strategy in caring for the poor.

Jesus told His disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees (Matthew 16:6). The Pharisees lacked compassion; the Sadducees lacked faith and an eternal perspective. My hope is that this paper will guard us, so that we, like Jesus, will be filled with both compassion and faith.

***“Love your fellowmen, and cry about them if you cannot bring them to Christ. If you cannot save them, you can weep over them. If you cannot give them a drop of cold water in hell, you can give them your heart’s tears while they are still in this body.”***

***-Charles Spurgeon***

**Here is a summary of this paper:**

**I. Jesus Christ wants us to grow in our compassion, and to reach out to the poor and needy in new and dynamic ways.**

- A. Jesus Christ is our example of showing compassion to all men.
- B. The Scriptures place a great emphasis on being compassionate.
- C. There are many excellent examples in Great Commission churches of people reaching out with compassion.

**II. God wants us to have a solid biblical and eternal perspective in our ministry to the poor.**

- A. Who are the Poor?
  - 1. In one sense, all mankind is poor before God.
  - 2. The poor are those who are poor in spirit—who are humble before God.
  - 3. The poor are those who are legitimately poor in the things of this world-- i.e., those who are materially disadvantaged or oppressed in some way.
  - 4. The poor are those who are persecuted for believing in Christ.
- B. The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, 20 is the over-arching mission given in the New Testament. We must always keep the Great Commission as our overall mission focus. Caring for the materially poor in the church and outside the church is under this over-arching mission.
- C. In the New Testament, God places a special expectation on Christians to clothe and feed poor family members and fellow believers in the church.
- D. Although the “social justice” teaching proclaimed by certain Christians is a good reminder to the church to be more compassionate and generous, much of this teaching is imbalanced or unbiblical and will hinder God’s purposes on this earth.

**III. I recommend a 5-fold strategy for churches to care for the poor in the world:**

- 1. Encourage church members to fulfill their responsibilities in their families and church.
- 2. Minister to believers in other cities and nations, especially those in Great Commission churches and persecuted believers.
- 3. In evangelism, remember that God transforms “humbled unbelievers” into “humble believers.” Therefore, reach out to unbelievers who are needy.
- 4. Equip members to care for the unbelieving poor through a relational approach.
- 5. Support and fund Christian workers to start churches in areas where the poor live.

## I. Jesus Christ wants us to grow in our compassion, and to reach out to the poor and needy in new ways.

### A. Jesus Christ and a Heart of Compassion

Jesus Christ is our model. We are to follow His example. We know from the Gospels that Jesus felt compassion for people who were “harassed and helpless” (Matthew 9:36, NIV). Out of compassion, Jesus preached the gospel to the poor and met physical needs. Unless we feel compassion for people, we will not have God’s mind on how we are to live our lives.

Like Jesus, we are to be holistic in our compassion. God is concerned about the whole person—body, soul and spirit. The love of Christ will compel Christians to be caring for the needy here and now. While we recognize the eternal impact of the gospel in delivering us from our sins and giving us life with God for eternity, we also recognize that the gospel of Jesus Christ will have a powerful effect in making this world a better place to be. The compassionate lives we live as fruit of the gospel will bring glory to God both now and in eternity.

This compassion will work itself out in how we use our resources. We are managers, stewards of limited resources (time, money, energy, spiritual gifts). However, if we are overly concerned about our resources, we can easily slip into being stingy. It takes faith to be generous. God blesses those who are generous (Proverbs 11:24-25). Like the Macedonians, we are to give out of our poverty (2 Corinthians 8:1-6).

### B. Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures and Compassion

For the purpose of this paper, I am using the word “poor” to refer to any who are needy: materially poor, physically disadvantaged, widows, orphans, the marginalized and oppressed.

Here are some Old Testament and New Testament verses that inspire or exhort us to be compassionate, particularly towards the poor:

*“If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother” (Deuteronomy 15:7).*

*“You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your countrymen or one of your aliens who is in your land in your towns” (Deuteronomy 24:14).*

*“I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted and justice for the poor” (Psalms 140:12).*

*“He who despises his neighbor sins, but happy is he who is gracious to the poor” (Proverbs 14:21).*

*“One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, And He will repay him for his good deed” (Proverbs 19:17).*

*“He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be answered” (Proverbs 21:13).*

*“Don’t be afraid of outgiving God. It is impossible to do that.”*

*-Charles R. Swindoll*

*“The righteous is concerned for the rights of the poor, the wicked does not understand such concern” (Proverbs 29:7).*

*“Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard” (Isaiah 58:6-8).*

*“Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy” (Ezekiel 16:49).*

*“...and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. And do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another” (Zechariah 7:10).*

*“Jesus was going through all the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:35, 36).*

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18, 19).*

*“But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:13, 14).*

*“Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys” (Luke 12:33).*

*“In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:35).*

*“Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation” (Romans 12:15, 16).*

*“For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Romans 15:26).*

*“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).*

***“Biblical orthodoxy without compassion is surely the ugliest thing in the world.”***

***-Francis Schaeffer***

*“So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12).*

*“If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.” (1 Timothy 5:16).*

*“Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27).*

*“For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, ‘You sit here in a good place,’ and you say to the poor man, ‘You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil motives? (James 2:2-4)*

***“I judge all things only by the price they shall gain in eternity.”***

***-John Wesley***

### **C. Compassion Ministries in Great Commission Churches**

The following are real life examples of Great Commission churches reaching out to believers and unbelievers with the compassion of Jesus Christ:

1. A church partners with a ministry that packages meals that are sent to starving children throughout the world.
2. A grandmother mobilizes a team of women in the church to start an on-going ministry that cares for single mothers.
3. A church in a depressed urban area runs a program that gives free bread to people in its city.
4. A pastor in a community church challenges the congregation to be radical for Jesus—and concludes the sermon by asking the members to leave their shoes in the church. These shoes are then given to the poor.
5. A church raises funds for a pro-life ministry that seeks to stop the killing of innocent unborn children in their city.
6. An American doctor begins a clinic in Honduras to provide medical treatment to the poor.
7. A couple leads a team of college students to an impoverished community in Mississippi to do service projects.
8. A U.S. church in a city destroyed by a flood is helped by other Great Commission churches that give finances and send mission teams to rebuild the church.
9. An optometrist provides free eye exams and glasses to needy people in Latin America.
10. A pastor begins a ministry that multiplies Christian workers in Europe to deliver people from the demonic oppression and deception of atheism.

11. A church promotes a ministry that supports the persecuted church in other countries.
12. A pastor cuts back his ministry activities in order to devote more time to care for his wife and his sick child.
13. A couple starts a church service on Sunday afternoons for the homeless in their community.
14. A pastor joins a regional ministry that strengthens pastors needing support in the spiritual battle.
15. A church partners with an urban ministry that provides academic tutoring to needy students.
16. A Christian leader begins a ministry to provide encouragement and strength to embattled Christian fathers.
17. A pastor modifies his church ministry schedule in order to care for an aging parent.
18. A missionary in Ukraine starts a ministry that helps alcoholics gain freedom through Jesus Christ.
19. A couple mobilizes a fellowship church to send thousands of Christmas shoeboxes with the message of Jesus Christ to children overseas.
20. Christians in U.S. Great Commission churches give sacrificially to provide relief to Honduran churches devastated by Hurricane Mitch.
21. A team of college students reaches out to international students at their university, helping them adjust to the new culture, and eventually sharing with them the message of Christ.
22. A pastor and his wife become missionaries to India, sharing the gospel with some of the most impoverished people in the world.
23. A couple with children decides to open up their hearts and their home by having foster children become part of their family.
24. A pastor reaches out to a young father in prison who he then leads to Christ.
25. Over several decades, a local church and other GCC churches financially care for a former elder who has significant health needs and is no longer able perform his regular pastoring functions.

***“A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor.”***

***-Proverbs 22:9***

As you can see from the above examples, the compassion of Jesus Christ is shown in many ways. The Holy Spirit does a marvelous work when a person is willing to be used to demonstrate the love of Christ to a needy world.

Our prayer and desire in Great Commission Churches is that God will inspire individuals and churches to grow in reaching out to the poor and needy in new ways. In particular, we are asking God to work through the next generation in even more powerful ways to the needy, so that the gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified will grow and multiply throughout the world.

Question: How does God want you to demonstrate the compassion of Jesus Christ?



## II. God wants us to have a biblical and eternal perspective in our ministry to the poor.

### A. Who are the poor?

#### 1. In one sense, all mankind is poor before God.

In America the word “poor” refers to a person without much money. The word “poor” has been expanded by some Christians to include those who are needy, marginalized by society, or oppressed. So, from man’s perspective, some people are poor and others are not. But from God’s perspective, every person is “needy.” Everyone is a slave of sin, blinded by the devil, and oppressed by this world system.

*“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:1, 2).*

It is important that we have an eternal perspective that all of us are “poor” before God.

#### 2. The poor are those who are poor in spirit—who are humble before God.

All men and women are spiritually captive, spiritually blind and spiritually oppressed. While God loves all men, His special favor is on those who are “poor in spirit”: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). Those who are poor in spirit—who are receptive to the gospel—are the ones that Jesus favors. And those are the ones God wants us to reach as well.

#### 3. The poor are those who are legitimately poor in the things of this world-- i.e., those who are materially disadvantaged or oppressed in some way.

Although all mankind is poor before God, we understand that the “poor” in Scripture usually refers to those who are materially or physically disadvantaged in society. God’s word puts a great emphasis on reaching out and caring for widows, orphans, the oppressed and materially poor.

A question arises: Since all mankind is poor before God, why is there such an emphasis on caring for those who are poor in this world?

In one sense, God favors no man. He is not a respecter of persons. In fact, God specifically forbids partiality towards the poor: “...nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his dispute” (Exodus 23:3). However, there are at least two reasons why God wants us to focus on caring for the poor:

- a. Human beings in their sinfulness and selfishness will gravitate towards people who can give to them rather than to the poor who have no resources to give. (Luke 14:13, 14). Therefore, God steps in and defends the poor and needy because they have been abandoned by human beings. He does so, not because He loves them more than others, but because they are more needy. If God has a special sensitivity to help and defend the needy, we ought to as well.

*“The bread that is spoiling in your house belongs to the hungry. The shoes that are mildewing under your bed belong to those who have none. The clothes stored away in your trunk belong to those who are naked.”*

*-Basil the Great*

b. As stated above, God loves all men—but His special favor is on those who are humble in spirit (1 Peter 5:5). A financially rich person with a humble heart will be blessed by God over an impoverished person with a proud heart. However, God oftentimes uses humbling circumstances to produce humble hearts. The disadvantaged person may be in a state of humility to receive the grace that God gives. Therefore God wants us to care for the poor and needy, in hopes of finding those who are truly “poor in spirit”—those who are receptive to the gospel of grace through Jesus Christ.

*“This country cannot afford to be materially rich and spiritually poor.”*

*-Abraham Lincoln*

In this regard, we learn from 1 Corinthians 1:26-29:

*“For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things that are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not that He might nullify the things that are, that no man may boast before God.”*

Ultimately, caring for those who are poor to this world is consistent with God’s overall plan to humble mankind and to bring glory to God-- *“to nullify the things that are so that no man may boast before God.”*

#### **4. The poor are those who are persecuted for believing in Christ.**

In the New Testament there is a special emphasis on caring for Christians—those who are poor in spirit—who are persecuted and physically oppressed. Persecuted believers are special because:

1. They are Christians—ones who are poor in spirit.
2. They are experiencing extreme suffering-many to the point of death.
3. There are evil and oppressive people who are actively trying to hurt them.
4. They are suffering because they proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Although we want to show compassion to all men, none of the four statements above are true of a typical unbeliever in the U.S., for example.

Throughout the gospels and the epistles, God’s people are faced with persecution because of their faith. (Matthew 24:9; Mark 10-29-31; John 15:18-27; Acts 4:1-22; 5: 17-42; 7:54-8:1; 12:1-17; 13:50; 14:5, 19-22; 16:19-24; 1 Corinthians 4:9-13; 15:32; 2 Corinthians 4: 7-12; 11:23-27; Galatians 6:17; Ephesians 3:1, 13; Philippians 1:12-14; 1 Thessalonians 2: 14-16; Thessalonians 1:4-7; 2 Timothy 1:8; 2:11-13; 3:10-12 1 Peter 2:18-25; 3: 13,14; 4:1, 12-19; Revelations 6:9-11; 13:10; 16: 5-7; 18:24)

Some examples of persecuted and oppressed believers today are:

1. Christians overseas who are jailed and tortured for their faith.
2. Believers in the United States who lose jobs or opportunities for economic advancement because they obey the Scriptures.
3. College students who suffer for taking a stand for Christ in their classrooms
4. Fathers and mothers who are opposed in their efforts to train their children for Christ.

Also, we should not forget the most oppressed group of people in the United States—unborn children who die through abortions. Christians who take steps to save the lives of unborn children are very much helping the persecuted poor.

## **B. The New Testament Mission: The Great Commission**

*The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19,20 is the over-arching mission given in the New Testament—and we must always keep the Great Commission as our overall mission focus. Caring for the materially poor in the church and outside the church is under this over-arching mission.*

### **1. What is the New Testament heart we are to have?**

In one word: Love. Jesus gave the Great Commandment which is to love God with all of your heart, mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39).

### **2. What is the New Testament over-arching mission?**

The advancement of the kingdom of God is a central theme throughout the Scriptures. It is God's desire for all mankind to come under the authority of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In keeping with that, we as believers are to have a "Great Commandment" lifestyle, always loving God and loving men. How is that love to be worked out in our mission?

While living a Great Commandment lifestyle, we are to embrace Jesus' mission: To seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10), and to build obedient disciples of Christ (Matthew 28:20). We are in a titanic struggle for the souls of men. Those who believe in Jesus Christ will have eternal life. Those who do not believe will experience the wrath of God for all of eternity (John 3:36). It is in the context of this eternal struggle that we exercise compassion. In His compassion, Jesus Christ gave the Great Commission:

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matthew 28:19, 20).*

We are to preach the gospel to all creation (Mark 16:15), leading people to Christ for their salvation (make disciples); to baptize them, placing them in local churches (1 Corinthians 12:13); and to teach them to obey all that Jesus commanded. In this way, God's kingdom is advanced on the earth. This is the mission of the church. We must always keep the Great Commission as our over-arching mission focus and not be distracted by another over-arching mission.

For example, we are to have many good goals and activities: Bible reading, prayer meetings, evangelism, building strong marriages, developing loving families, establishing spiritually healthy churches, and feeding the poor. But these noble goals and activities are under the over-arching mission of the church, which is the Great Commission. It is vital that we keep this big picture in mind.

For some people, eradicating poverty in the world has become their over-arching mission. However, Jesus, after His resurrection did not give His followers the over-arching mission to "feed and clothe the poor." The only mission He focused on after He rose from the dead was the Great Commission. On

***"He who is dying of hunger must be fed rather than taught."***

***-Saint Thomas Aquinas***

the other hand, we understand that obedient disciples of Jesus Christ will love people, which will include meeting their physical needs. If we are truly embracing the over-arching mission of the church—the Great Commission—it will result in obedient disciples who will indeed have strong marriages, loving families, spiritually healthy churches and Christians who are caring for the poor. However, if we, as pastors, are promoting strong families and caring for the poor or any other noble goal or activity without teaching the over-arching mission of the Great Commission, we are not properly reflecting the mission that is on Christ's heart.

*“How different our standard is from Christ's. We ask how much a man gives. He asks how much he keeps.”*

*-Andrew Murray*

### 3. What are some other verses that show the priority of the Great Commission?

- a. In referring to the poor at the beginning of His ministry, Jesus highlights that His mission was to “preach the gospel to the poor” (Luke 4:18). However the word “poor” is defined, the mandate of Jesus was not that the poor be clothed and fed but that they have the gospel preached to them.
- b. When Jesus saw the poor and had compassion on them, He instructed His disciples to pray for workers (Matthew 9:35-38). Based on this passage, I would argue that the most compassionate step we can take for the needy in this world is to pray for the multiplication of workers in the gospel.
- c. After Jesus rose from the dead, He directed His disciples to preach the gospel to all creation (Mark 16:15) and to make disciples of all the nations (Matthew 28:19, 20). There is no mention in Jesus' post-resurrection teachings of a focused ministry on the poor.
- d. Preaching the good news was the emphasis of the Apostles in the Book of Acts and the epistles. The Apostles arranged their personal time this way (Acts 6:1-7). As important as it was to care for the widows, the apostles understood that the greatest good they could do was to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4).
- e. The importance of proclaiming the Word of God is affirmed in 1 Corinthians 12:27-31, where the greater gifts (the speaking gifts) are defined. This reflects the purpose of the church.
- f. 1 Timothy is Paul's “How to Lead the Church” manual to Timothy. Notice the order and emphasis of the topics in this letter. Before addressing the needs of widows in chapter 5 and exhorting the rich to be generous in verse 6:18, Paul first urges Timothy to silence false teachers (Chapter 1), build a church of prayer (Chapter 2), appoint leaders (Chapter 3), and to teach the Word (Chapter 4). So, Paul was concerned for the widows and building generosity in the church. But with his first emphasis being on the ministry or prayer and the Word, Paul established the gospel as primary and central to all activities of the Church. When a church is established in the Word, then a sure foundation exists to build compassion ministries and a generous spirit in all Christians.

At the same time, I want to emphasize that there is no duality between gospel proclamation and gospel demonstration. While the Great Commission is the priority, it is not an “either/or” but a “both/and.” As we proclaim the eternal gospel of Jesus Christ, God calls us to live out the love of Christ by meeting the physical needs of people.

#### 4. Doesn't Luke 4:18,19 indicate that Jesus' mission was to reach out to the poor?

In Luke 4:18,19, Jesus said, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord."*

This passage is often taught as the "Vision Statement" or "Mission Statement" for Jesus. How does this passage relate to the Great Commission? Is this a mandate from Jesus to reach out to the poor? Is this passage a call to eradicate poverty, hunger and oppression?

To understand Luke 4:18,19, we first must see that Jesus was identifying Himself with the Messianic prophecy, which foretold the coming of the One who would deliver His people from their oppression. When the Jews heard Jesus read from Isaiah 61, their minds would naturally go to their desire for liberation from Rome. But Jesus identified their real enemy as *their own sin!* Rome was just a symptom of the real issue – the sinfulness of God's people and their need for liberation from it.

Thus, while caring for the poor's physical needs is part of what Jesus did, Israel needed to see that their poverty, oppression, blindness, and captivity were due to a need they shared with everyone else in the world – including the Romans – sinfulness. And Jesus' proclamation of the Gospel, while it included ministry to those in need, was primarily aimed at getting to this root of all their problems and the problems of all the other nations of the world. This confirms the focus of Jesus' mission as He trained His disciples for their coming task of proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth.

A key question is: Who are the "poor" according to Luke 4:18,19? To answer this question –and to understand Jesus' mission—it is important to read the rest of this passage:

*And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, "Is this not Joseph's son?" And He said to them, "No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.'" And He said, "Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown. "But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land; and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. "And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; and they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, He went His way" (Luke 4:20-30).*

*"Sometimes I would like to ask God why He allows poverty, suffering, and injustice when He could do something about it." - "Well, why don't you ask Him?" - "Because I'm afraid He would ask me the same question."*

-Anonymous



The people in Nazareth wanted Jesus to feed and heal everyone. But He refused. Why? Jesus explained that Elijah did not feed all the widows in Israel and Elisha did not heal every leper. Like those two prophets, Jesus came to minister to those who were “poor in spirit”—who were humble before God. Jesus was also stating to the Jews that His favor was on those who were humble—even if they were not Jews. These Gentiles—the widow in Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian—were poor in spirit and were blessed by God. So too we are to care for those who are humble before God.

***“Endeavor to live so that when you die, even the undertaker will be sorry.”***

*-Anonymous*

Luke 4:18,19 reveals the heart of Jesus. He had compassion for people, which led Him to feed the hungry, heal the sick and to deliver them from demonic oppression. But when considering the primary needs of His poor, oppressed, blind, and captive people, His compassion caused Him to focus on helping them identify their primary need—their sin and their need to repent and put their trust in Him. For some to say that Jesus’ stated over-arching mission was to “alleviate or eradicate physical poverty” is to make a serious error and miss the most important part of His message and His mission—to eradicate sin in the lives of His people. Thus, when He rose from the dead and commissioned His disciples, He directed them to do what He had done and to focus as He had focused. And while they, and we, are to engage in acts of compassion to meet the needs of people in holistic ways, we must remember that Jesus told them and us to make disciples, baptize them and to teach them observe all that He commanded.

### **5. How does feeding and clothing the poor relate to this mission of winning people to Christ?**

Christians dedicated to obey the Great Commission are not to be “utilitarian.” We don’t feed the poor in order to “get people to join our group.” Rather, Christians care for people because that is what followers of Christ do. Christ followers are to be people of compassion. And they do so by sharing the gospel while caring for the needs of people.

A good example of this is the Good Samaritan parable (Luke 10:30-37). This story shows that we are to avoid self-justification and to love the unlovable. This is the heart that God wants us to have towards all men. The person who responds to Jesus will live a life of compassion. How that compassion works itself out will vary from person to person.

On one hand, caring for the physical needs of people often leads to their receiving Jesus Christ. It is the kindness of God that leads people to repentance (Romans 2:4). On the other hand, the most compassionate step for some is to allow them to go hungry. Hunger was God’s way of bringing the prodigal son to his senses, leading to his repentance (Luke 15:14-18). As we seek God on how to best love people, God will give us wisdom on what step to take to bring a person to salvation in Christ.

Compassion ministries will be an overflow of the evangelism and discipleship provided by the leaders of the church. In this regard, there are two quotes from William Booth, who started the Salvation Army, that give us some instruction.

On the one hand, Booth was unwavering in his mission, which was to fulfill the Great Commission of Jesus Christ: *“I must assert in the most unqualified way that it is primarily and mainly for the sake of saving the soul that I seek the salvation of the body.”* On the other hand, Booth was extremely practical in

his fulfilling the Great Commission when he said, *“But what is the use of preaching the Gospel to men whose whole attention is concentrated upon a mad, desperate struggle to keep themselves alive.”* May God grant the Great Commission church movement to keep both perspectives in mind.

### C. The New Testament Mandate to Clothe and Feed the Poor

*In the New Testament, God places a special expectation on Christians to clothe and feed poor family members and fellow believers in the church.*

#### 1. What is the New Testament mandate as to feeding and clothing the poor?

There is a general mandate to love all men—to have compassion on every person. We are to love the whole person—spiritually, emotionally, and physically. The question is: How is that worked out practically?

As to clothing and feeding the poor, Christians are commanded to provide for the physical needs of family members and believers in the church:

*“But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8).*

*“But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him” (1 John 3:17).*

So, there is a clear mandate to feed and clothe the poor in our families and churches.

#### 2. Is there a New Testament mandate to feed and clothe every unbeliever we see?

As stated earlier, there is a clear mandate to love all men. However, the “reproaching” language used by Paul in 1 Timothy 5:8 and John in 1 John 3:17 is not used in the New Testament in describing our responsibility to unbelievers who are destitute. There is no example in the New Testament of Christians under a “mandate” to feed and clothe all unbelievers. Jesus did not go throughout Israel to make sure that everyone had food and clothing. Nor did the Apostles give their time to feeding and clothing unbelievers.

Still, there is a mandate to “love all men” and to take steps to see them won to Jesus Christ. And meeting the practical needs of people will be a major way in which God will direct individuals and churches to love unbelievers in their communities.

#### 3. What about Matthew 25:31-46? Doesn’t this passage indicate that we are to clothe and feed all the poor that we know?

*“Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord when did we see you hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give you something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You? The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me’” (Matthew 25:37-40).*

*“We must never minimize the suffering of another. Scripture’s mandate to us is, ‘Weep with them that weep’ (Romans 12:15).”*

*-Billy Graham*

Matthew 25 is often quoted to urge Christians to care for unbelievers. However, this passage is speaking of caring for believers in Christ, most likely in the context of persecution. Jesus refers to these needy people as “brothers of Mine”—and Jesus makes it clear that His brother is the one who “*does the will of My Father who is in heaven*” (Matthew 12:50). Very possibly this passage was written in the context of the anticipated persecution during the tribulation period (Matthew 24:9). As in Acts 9:4 when Saul’s persecution of the church was equated with persecuting Jesus (Jesus said, “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?*”), Matthew 25 is also equating the suffering of the church with Christ’s suffering.

Consider the following passages from the book of Hebrews:

*“But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one” (Hebrews 10:32-34).*

*“Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are illtreated, since you yourselves also are in the body” (Hebrews 13:3).*

These Hebrews passages give perspective of Jesus’ words in Matthew 25:37-40. We are to care for our brothers and sisters in Christ, particularly those who are suffering for their faith.

#### **4. In light of the above, which is a greater priority: meeting the need of believers in another city or country, or meeting the needs of poor unbelievers in our community?**

Galatians 6:10 states: “*Let us do good to all men, especially those of the household of the faith.*” Based on this verse, I would prioritize the needs of believers in another country over unbelievers in the U.S. In Acts 11:29,30, Barnabas and Saul took the offering from Antioch to meet the needs of the saints in Jerusalem. Some have speculated that Barnabas and Saul likely bypassed some of the needs of the unbelieving poor in Antioch in order to meet the believers of Christians in Judea. Although admittedly this is speculation, this example and the clear teaching of Galatians 6:10 have led me to prioritize my giving to believers, whether they be in my own church or overseas. However, I also recognize that the Holy Spirit will prompt people to give as He sees fit, whether to unbelievers at home, or believers abroad.

#### **5. Is there a priority to give based on the type of need?**

Yes. I recognize the difference of “need.” We prioritize people who are destitute (lacking food, clothing, and/or shelter), over people who have lesser needs (transportation, meals when life is busy). Older widows had a greater need than younger widows (1 Timothy 5). People who have the ability to work have lesser need than those who do not. The assumption of 2 Corinthians 8-9 is a crisis of great need: People were starving. This is why the Macedonians gave out of their poverty. Starving people had a greater need. And, in general, the poor in other countries have a greater need than the poor in the United States.

*“Trying to do the Lord’s work in your own strength is the most confusing, exhausting, and tedious of all work. But when you are filled with the Holy Spirit, then the ministry of Jesus just flows out of you.”*

*-Corrie Ten Boom*



For these reasons, ministry that provides material needs to destitute Christian overseas (particularly persecuted believers) should be a high priority. Their physical needs are greater than those of unbelievers in the U.S., and we have a greater responsibility to meet the material needs of people in the body of Christ than we do of nonbelievers.

#### **6. What part does a person's character play in how to minister to the poor?**

Inside the church, there is a giving priority to people with demonstrated character (1 Timothy 5:9-10, 2 Thessalonians 3:10). Perhaps this is one reason why in the early days of Acts, meeting needs was funneled through the Apostles (Acts 4:32-37). In particular, I would caution against young and idealistic church members giving money to certain segments of the materially poor, who are skilled in taking advantage of the naïve.

While it is true that God gives rain to all men, even His enemies, we need to prioritize giving to people outside the church who respond to root issues. The best kind of generosity is personal, accountable, and spiritual. One exception to this is in the case of a crisis. The needs created by a natural disaster (e.g. flood, famine, etc.) should receive quick attention without as much attention to character issues.

#### **D. Social Justice Teaching**

*Although the "social justice" teaching proclaimed by certain Christians is a good reminder to the church to be more compassionate and generous, much of this teaching is imbalanced or unbiblical and will hinder God's purposes on this earth.*

##### **1. What about the term "social justice?"**

The term "social justice" is a popular term used today to describe a mandate for men and women to eradicate or alleviate poverty, oppression and injustice from the earth. Depending on who uses the term, social justice may refer to a form of economic egalitarianism through income redistribution.

Christian therefore should be careful about embracing the "Social Justice" movement because so many of those promoting this term do not come from a Christian worldview. They may mean something by this term very different than what we, as believers, believe to be Biblical. Generally speaking, the "Social Justice" movement is rooted in political movements that seek to impose "equality" through the power of government. While such a goal may sound noble, the only way government can bring about such "equality" is to violate other Scriptural principles of freedom and ownership of private property. Biblically, we understand justice to refer to impartial treatment before the law, not a government guarantee of equal economic status.

Therefore, in referring to compassion ministries done by Christians or by the church as a whole, I prefer not to use the term "social justice." The term has so many different definitions that its usage is confusing and even, perhaps, misleading. In particular, the term "social justice" is used by many non-Christian and professing Christians to inaccurately portray Jesus' mission on the earth. My concern is that naïve and good hearted Christians will be misled by people who are not devoted Christians, but who use Christian jargon to promote their own personal agenda. For these reasons, I urge Christians to use a different term (such as "Christian compassion" or "Biblical justice").

*"You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you."*

*-John Bunyan*

## 2. What good do you see from Christians who are advocating “social justice?”

This movement challenges the church to be strong in compassion, to live modestly, to be generous with our money, and to treat our fellow man with fairness and justice, which I appreciate. Any exhortation to grow in compassion and Christ-like righteousness is good. Poverty and sickness are real needs. We, in America, have been given many resources which God wants us to share with the world. There is much injustice in the world—the abortion of unborn children, sex trafficking, and economic oppression. Efforts taken to correct these injustices and to meet the needs of the poor are noble and should be encouraged.

*“Your spiritual gift is whatever you can do for someone else in the name of Jesus.”*

*-Anonymous*

## 3. What concerns do you have about the Christian social justice movement?

My main concern is with the teachings and beliefs of certain Christian “social justice” teachers today. The term “social justice” is promoted by many whose beliefs are not strongly rooted in the Scriptures. Many who promote social justice do not accept Jesus as the only way to salvation or the Bible as the literal Word of God. If God’s word is not the center, the following will occur:

- a. The gospel message of forgiveness and deliverance from an eternal hell through the cross of Christ is denied or downplayed and the Great Commission is set aside as the over-arching mission of the church.<sup>1</sup>
- b. The Bible-teaching church as God’s vehicle for reaching the world with the gospel of Christ is effectively replaced by social programs that meet temporal needs without addressing the eternal destiny of the poor.
- c. The biblical family is undermined or downplayed as central to God’s purposes on this earth.<sup>2</sup>

For these reasons, I would evaluate the teaching of any professing Christian who is promoting a social justice agenda.

## 4. What is to be our response to the “social justice” message?

Christians are to take the lead in showing compassion to the lost and justice to all mankind. If we simply live out the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, God will bring true compassion and justice, both eternally and, to a certain degree, in this world.

For these reasons, I recommend that instead of identifying with the “social justice movement,” we live out compassionate and just lives under the banner of Jesus Christ and the gospel. My strong exhortation is to avoid teachers whose beliefs are not based on the Bible, and to learn from those teachers whose lives and teachings are founded on the Scriptures. In ministering to the poor, join with Christians who hold to an evangelical Statement of Faith (such as the GCC Statement of Faith) and who promote New Testament values and practices (such as those written in the GCC Core Values Statement).

### III. Church Strategy/Priorities Questions

I recommend a 5-fold strategy to pastors for churches to care for the poor in the world:

1. *Encourage church members to fulfill their responsibilities in their families and church.*
2. *Minister to believers in other cities and nations, especially believers in Great Commission churches and persecuted believers.*
3. *In evangelism, remember that God transforms “humbled unbelievers” into “humble believers.” Therefore, reach out to unbelievers who are needy.*
4. *Equip members to care for the unbelieving poor through a relational approach.*
5. *Support and fund Christian workers to start churches in areas where the poor live.*

#### 1. Encourage church members to fulfill their God-given responsibilities.

The first step in loving all men is to fulfill our responsibilities. As believers we have a special responsibility for our own lives, our families, and our churches. The emphasis for compassion ministries in the New Testament is to help the believing poor. The goal is to build responsibility within the covenant community of the family and the church. Therefore:

- a. Meet your own needs first (Ephesians 4:28, 1 Thessalonians 4:11- 12, 2 Thessalonians 3:11-12, Titus 3:14).
- b. Then family needs (1 Timothy 5:8)
- c. Then believers in your local church (1 John 3:17)
- d. After meeting the needs of those within our covenantal community, we seek to meet the needs of other believers and unbelievers, particularly those within our geographical area.

Should a person in debt give to the poor? My answer is: Generally, I would encourage a person in debt to get out of debt first before giving a free will offering to meet another person’s need. Getting out of debt is an act of compassion towards your family, your church and the lost. (At the same time, I do not deny that the Lord might lead someone who is working to get out of debt to be generous with a needier person in a particular instance.)

Another question is: What do you think about church members who give their tithe to help the poor? My answer is: Your first responsibility is to support your church led by your pastors. The tithe is intended to support the pastors and the overall church ministry, which would include ministering to the poor. Therefore, I encourage members to tithe to the local church, and then if a particular person is in need, I encourage members to give a free will offering above the tithe.

Finally, does it make a difference what profession we choose to meet the needs of our families? Answer: It is worth considering how your vocation is helping the overall community. Is the job you are doing generally enhancing the welfare of the community? Is your vocation in some way taking advantage of

*“Find out how much God has given you and from it take what you need; the remainder is needed by others.”*

*-Saint Augustine*

the poor? Christians should consider professions that benefit the community as a whole and specifically those who are needy.

**2. Minister to believers in other cities and nations, especially those in Great Commission churches and persecuted believers.**

One of the most prominent compassion projects highlighted in the New Testament was Paul's raising of funds from Gentile believers to help the poor in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8, 9). Caring for believers outside of our own congregation is a powerful testimony to the world of our love for another as believers.

In that regard, it is important to realize that God has organized Christians in churches and associations of churches. Just as believers in a congregation take a special responsibility to care for a member of that congregation, we in Great Commission Churches take a special responsibility to care for members in churches in our association and our overall movement. For example, Great Commission churches helped the GCC church in North Dakota devastated by the 1997 flood, and served the GCLA churches in Honduras during Hurricane Mitch. We are also to give special care to the persecuted believer. Those who suffer because of their faith are not only needy financially or physically. They also have people intentionally trying to oppress them. Therefore, serving the persecuted church through such ministries as Voice of the Martyrs is to be a high priority in our caring for the poor.

**3. In evangelism, remember that God transforms “humbled unbelievers” into “humble believers.” Therefore, reach out to unbelievers who are needy.**

We are called to share the gospel with all creation (Mark 16:15). We are also called to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit as Christ's witnesses to the world (Acts 1:8). As a practical matter, we understand that God is preparing hearts to receive the message of Christ. How does He do so? Oftentimes, God uses humbling circumstances to transform unbelievers into humble Christians. Therefore, as believers seeking to win the lost, it is wise to sow the gospel especially with those who are needy.

This principle of reaching out with the gospel to those who are needy has a one-on-one application as well as a church corporate strategy. As believers, we need to be especially aware of how God is using circumstances to humble unbelievers in our lives. Physical sickness, economic hardship, and family problems are used by the Lord to bring unbelievers to Himself. For those that the Lord is humbling, we need to be especially alert to opportunities to share the love of Christ and the message of the Cross.

Also, as the church does corporate outreach, it is wise to reach out to those sections of the community that are poor, needy and marginalized. Campus ministry has been so effective for Great Commission churches for the past four decades because of the many “spiritual orphans” at universities. Thousands of students who needed a family to be a part of were loved by the church and brought into a relationship with God, their Heavenly Father. Community churches have had a special ministry to moms who were divorced, widowed, or whose husbands were not providing for them spiritually, emotionally or financially. People enslaved by addictions have found Christ through church outreaches that proclaim the love and power of the risen Christ.

*“The more he cast away  
the more he had.”*

*-John Bunyan*

Therefore, while we are to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with all people in our communities, I recommend that churches make a special effort to reach out to needy individuals and those broad segments of the community that are going through humbling circumstances.

#### **4. Equip members to care for the unbelieving poor through a relational approach.**

Many churches organize programs that bless unbelievers in their community with acts of kindness. These are done in obedience to Galatians 6:10: “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.”

One benefit of organized compassion programs is that it provides a way to mobilize church members to do acts of service, which they would not do otherwise. Also, these ministries are a great and visible apologetic for our day. “Doing good to all men” is important to our culture, especially the younger generation.

While the Lord has worked marvelously through organized ministries that care for the unbelieving poor, it is important to realize that many institutions and programs begun by Christians have often become separated from the gospel. Colleges formed by churches now are proclaiming atheism and social programs formed by evangelical believers are now in the hands of non-Christians. Also, if not carefully monitored, ongoing organized programs may be found to be ineffective. Goodhearted Christians can oftentimes be so taken up with keeping a program running that they lose sight of whether the program is truly helping the poor and that the gospel is remaining central to it.

There are no New Testament examples of an organized compassion program designed to feed and clothe the unbelieving poor. (In Acts 6, there was program organized to care for widows in the church.) Although this fact should not keep us from starting such a program, it should at least cause us to pause when organizing compassion projects for the lost. In the New Testament, believers showed compassion to the lost more personally. When giving is personal, relationships are strengthened. People appreciate their need being met through friends, rather than the “impersonal” church doing so as an organization.

So, while applauding organized compassion projects to serve the poor in a community, I especially encourage churches to equip members to minister to the unbelieving poor using a relational approach, through small groups or through individual families.

#### **5. Support Christian workers to start churches to reach the poor.**

One of the people groups in the United States that is still unreached are the poor, particularly in urban areas. America is divided along economic lines. Wealthy people live with wealthy people; middle class people live with middle class people; and poor people live with poor people. As a practical matter, we need to consider taking steps to cross over these economic boundaries in order to bring Christ to these people.

As leaders, we should consider promoting and cultivating a heart to reach the poor. It is possible that our people are avoiding ministry among the poor because of an addiction to comfort. At the same time, let's be careful not to transfer a personal passion for a certain ministry onto someone else. There

*“Society's  
rejects have a  
special place in  
God's heart.”*

*-Anonymous*

will be Christians “called” to reach out to the poor—just as there will be Christians “called” to reach other people groups in other countries. Not all Christians are missionaries. Not all will be “called” to reach the poor. But some will, and we want to support them as much as possible.

In light of this, consider Matthew 9:35-38:

*Jesus was going through all the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.’*

*“Do all the good you can,  
by all the means you can,  
in all the ways you can,  
in all the places you can,  
at all the times you can,  
to all the people you can,  
as long as ever you can.”*

*-John Wesley*

The compassion of Jesus Christ resulted in a plea for workers—gospel workers. For this reason, I believe that the most compassionate step we can take for the unbelieving poor of the world is to support gospel workers to plant churches in areas where the poor live.

Missionaries who do incarnational ministry in urban areas in the U.S. and in needy countries overseas will have the most dynamic impact for fulfilling Christ’s mission with the needy. Church planters are able to meet basic needs in a relational and personal way while also evangelizing the lost and discipling the saved.

As a movement of churches, I urge us to give these missionaries our support— through our prayers, our finances, and our service by sending mission teams. Money given to support workers to plant Great Commission churches among the poor, in the U.S and overseas, ought to be a priority way that we give to the poor.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> An example of this is the statement made by President Jimmy Carter, a person is who viewed as a leader in social justice:

*“...the most serious and universal problem is the growing chasm between the richest and poorest people on earth....The results of this disparity are root causes of most of the world’s unresolved problems, including starvation, illiteracy, environmental degradation, violent conflict, and unnecessary illnesses...”* (Page 98, *A Hole in Our Gospel* by Richard Stearns)

I agree that greed is sin; that we are to deplore selfishness; and that we are to care for the poor. However, if I were asked the question, “What is the most serious and universal problem today?,” my answer would be “The most serious and universal problem today is sin—and the one and only cure is Jesus Christ.” Our message—Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2) must be clear. If it is muddled, the world will not be saved.

<sup>2</sup> Many in the social justice movement endorse (or refuse to speak out strongly against) homosexuality, which itself undermines the biblical family. Also, the mundane caring for family members is not highlighted compared to serving in “exciting” programs to minister to the poor. Finally, certain Christian social justice teachers can appeal to the fleshly desire of youth to disrespect and separate from their elders by criticizing the older generation for not promoting a social justice agenda.



MINISTRY TO THE POOR

**Exercise**

1. In general, what are your thoughts about this paper?

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2. What practical steps are you doing as an individual to show the compassion of Jesus Christ? What additional steps can you take?

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3. What practical steps is your church taking to minister to needy people? What additional steps can your church take?

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MINISTRY TO THE POOR

**Exercise**

4. What do you think about what this paper states as to our biblical mission?

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5. What do you think about what this paper states about the social justice movement?

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6. What are your thoughts about the recommended 5-fold strategy for caring for the poor and needy people in the world?

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MINISTRY TO THE POOR

**Exercise**

7. Develop a church wide strategy for ministering to the poor and needy in your community. What are the key elements of that strategy?

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